

Low-Order Explosion and Fire Injures Two, Destroys Building at Army Ammunition Plant

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A flash fire in an area of the Voluntary Army Ammunition plant which a year earlier housed explosive components of TNT slightly injured two employees Thursday morning and destroyed a building valued at between \$25,000 and \$50,000, officials said.

Lt. Col. William Baird, plant commander, said William Smith and Foyd Smith, who were participating in phasing-out clean-up operations at the plant, were treated by a plant physician for scrapes and minor cuts, and a wrenched knee in one case, and returned to work.

A halt in production at VAAP, which was the sole producer of TNT in the country, was announced on Wednesday — a result of a peacetime lack of demand for the explosive.

Baird said the production line at the finishing building had been closed down the previous night. A "low-order explosion . . . a whoosh" touched off the fire around 8:25 a.m., the colonel said.

The cause of the blast had not been determined by Thursday night. Baird

said an FBI agent questioned witnesses after the blast, and a board of investigation from the Armed Material Readiness Command in Rock Island, Ill., will make a detailed investigation.

Sabotage has not been ruled out, Baird said, "but we think it is a very low probability at this time."

Initial speculation on the cause centered on TNT dust contamination which could set off such a chain reaction. "It is still open I would think," Baird said of the possibility.

Baird said the two employees were participating in clean-up operations at the blast-proof enclosure when the flash fire erupted.

One of the men received his injuries when he fell while running from the building and cut and scraped his hands and knees, said Baird. Neither man was burned.

Baird said the building was a dugout-type structure behind barricades and includes a collapsible roof.

"It blew away as we designed it so it wasn't contained," the colonel said,

" . . . so it didn't blow the entire structure away."

The fire, he said, was allowed to burn itself out before plant officials inspected the damage.

"In a case like this we normally curtain off the area and not fight the fire because of the threat to personnel," he said. "And when it goes out we go in."

The area was sealed off throughout the day and night, awaiting the investigators, Baird said.

Baird said the fire could have been "very serious" had the plant been in operation. The danger of a chain reaction would have existed had the production line been in operation.

"All of the in-process materials had already passed that point," he said. "So we were in the process of cleaning up, and there was a very low quantity of TNT left in there."

Baird said the fire will have no effect on the mothballing of the facility. The production line will be restored to its original condition after the investigation is completed.